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RUSKIN AND THE *WAVERLEY NOVELS*

Andrew Lang, in an essay on Scott, remarks: "Often as it has been my fortune to write about Sir Walter Scott, I never sit down to do so without a sense of happiness and elation."¹ Many have been of similar mind. The circle of Scott's admirers has always been large, and includes names as diverse as those of Goethe,² Byron,³ FitzGerald,⁴ Dumas,⁵ Gladstone,⁶ Hogg,⁷ Irving,⁸ and Ruskin. Scott wins his popularity in no one way. His poetry has had its admirers. His novels have had a host of readers. But many in his own day, and since then, have been drawn to

¹ Warner: *Library of the World's Best Literature*, xxii, 11995.

² Albert Bielschowsky: *The Life of Goethe* (tr. W. A. Cooper), iii, 173, 175.

³ E. C. Mayne: *Byron*, ii, 278 n 2: "Byron's delight in the *Waverley Novels* was so great that he never travelled without his copies of them, and *Quentin Durward* was one of the last books he read."

⁴ A. Benson: *Edward FitzGerald*, p. 159: "FitzGerald worshipped Scott, read and re-read him in the days of strong sight; and in the days of clouded vision had the novels read to him. Scott opened a door to him into an enchanted world, not the dreary, familiar world he knew so well and was often so wearied of, but into a brave, bright country of fair ladies and shrewd crones, of freebooters and knights and gallant gentlemen. . . . Scott's defects as a writer seemed to FitzGerald to float like straws on a river deep and wide."

⁵ P. FitzGerald: *Life and Adventures of Alexander Dumas*, i, 98: "The English writer that enjoyed the heartiest popularity, and who was read with delight and interest, was Walter Scott; and though Dumas, like his countrymen, disdained to acknowledge obligation, historical romances like *Ivanhoe* and *Quentin Durward* suggested the romantic historical drama which Dumas and Victor Hugo were presently to introduce; nay, the dashing spirit of *Monte Cristo* and of *The Three Musketeers* is to be found in the same illustrious models."

⁶ Cf. John Morley: *Life of Gladstone*, i, 387 n 1; iii, 424, 491.

⁷ James Hogg's intimacy with and admiration for Scott may quickly be verified by reading the references to Hogg in Lockhart's *Life of Walter Scott*. In 1834 Hogg published *The Domestic Manners and Private Life of Sir Walter Scott*. See Hogg's *Lines to Sir Walter Scott*.

⁸ See Irving's letter in which he comments upon the rumor that Walter Scott was the author of the *Sketch Book* (P. M. Irving: *Life and Letters of Washington Irving*, ii, 22): "I cannot help smiling at the idea that anything I have written should be deemed worthy of being attributed to Sir Walter Scott, and that I should be called upon to vindicate my weak pen from the honor of such a parentage. He could tenant half a hundred scribblers like myself on the mere skirts of his literary reputation."

him chiefly as a generous and high-souled man, so loving by nature that, if report be true, not only dogs⁹ were devoted to him as a kind master, but a sentimental pig conceived an ardent attachment for him.

Since the name of Scott is a familiar household word, to mention it is probably to awaken the memory of a series of dramatic pictures, seen first, perhaps, in childhood in the pages of the novels that have served so many children as the magic key opening to them the world of romance. It may be a great tournament, Queen Elizabeth's visit to Kenilworth, the mysterious mass in the cave of Theodorick, the meeting between Louis XI and Charles of Burgundy, Mary Queen of Scots' escape from Lochleven Castle, Cromwell's raid at Woodstock, Waverley entertained in the hall of Fergus MacIvor, or the exploits of Rob Roy's band of rovers. In the same way, one is able to mention quite casually a goodly number of people from Scott's novels whom he remembers as real persons and not as names in books. No one forgets Jeanie Deans, Diana Vernon, Flora MacIvor, Edie Ochiltree, Old Mortality, Jonathan Oldbuck, Madge Wildfire, Saunders Mucklebackit, Dominie Samson, Andrew Fairservice, or Peter Peebles.

Yet our familiarity with certain portions of Scott's work occasionally leads us to forget his total literary output. His novels and tales alone number thirty-two. These stories, from *Count Robert of Paris* to *St. Ronan's Well*, cover a period of about eight centuries and record events in the reigns of fifteen English rulers, besides the period of the Commonwealth. They localize these events in Constantinople, Jerusalem, Wales, Syria, Flanders, France, Switzerland, and various parts of England and Scotland. Scott was forty-three years of age when his first novel was published. Known in the literary world before this time as a poet, he had produced a body of verse fairly large in bulk. One must not forget either his translations from the German, his collections of ballads, his biographies and editions of Dryden and Scott, his life of Napoleon, comprising

⁹ P. M. Irving: *Life and Letters of Washington Irving* (ed. 1863), i, 381 ff.; 383, 385; J. G. Lockhart: *Life of Walter Scott* (Macm., 1914), iii, 399 ff.

nine closely printed octavo volumes, or his history of Scotland. And this list entirely omits numerous essays, reviews, and notes upon various subjects. It is well to realize something of the extent of Scott's work before attempting to pass critical judgment upon it.

One of the great services which Ruskin renders to those who read him at all faithfully is in enlarging their range of interests. Certainly, no one seriously ignorant of Walter Scott could continue to read Ruskin without a sense of shame. The life-long influence which Scott exercised upon Ruskin is a matter of common knowledge. Yet it might appear from superficial observation that the two men were very unlike. The country gentleman from Abbotsford, entertaining lavishly, creating novels rapidly, apparently to fill his purse and to amuse the public, seems different from that passionate other, who, as life advanced, felt increasingly called upon to utilize his whole strength of mind and body to correct what he deemed to be the abuses of his generation. It appears hard to reconcile the spirit of the man who declares that "Rokeby does and must go forward, or my trees and enclosures might, perchance, stand still"¹⁰ with that which prompted the promulgator of the doctrine that "There is no Wealth but Life".¹¹ Scott, feverishly jeopardizing his own and his family's fortune to add new and incongruous turrets to Abbotsford and to increase an estate already large, appears not akin to Ruskin when the latter says:—

"In actual life, let me assure you, . . . the first 'wisdom of calm' is to plan, and resolve to labour for, the comfort and beauty of a home such as, if we could obtain it, we would quit no more. Not a compartment of a model lodging-house, not the number so-and-so of Paradise Row; but a cottage all of our own, with its little garden, its pleasant view, its surrounding fields, its neighbouring stream, its healthy air and clean kitchen, parlours, and bedrooms. Less than this no man should be content with for his nest; more than this few should seek."¹²

¹⁰ *Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott* (Houghton Mifflin, 1894) i, 243.

¹¹ Ruskin's *Works*, xvii, 105. (The references to Ruskin in this paper are uniformly to E. T. Cook's and Alexander Wedderburn's Library Edition.)

¹² Ruskin's *Works*, xxii, 263.

Yet there are resemblances, also, which occur to one without too great reflection. There are coincidences in the lives of the two men. Ruskin's parents were grandchildren of one John Ruskin, of Edinburgh. Both they and he spent much time in Scotland. Frederick Harrison says of Ruskin: "He talked with a lowland accent, and his dominant tone of mind was a mysterious amalgam of John Knox, Carlyle, and Walter Scott."¹³ By the time Ruskin was twenty-one he had suffered three serious illnesses, and one must marvel at the great body of work he produced when one considers the number of times his labors were completely interrupted by brain-storm or other affliction. All this recalls Scott's early lameness, and the degree to which gout, stomach complaint, and incipient apoplexy disturbed his work in later years. The amount of writing done by both men was tremendous. Scott's work has been roughly outlined and seen to be large in bulk, and one remembers as readily that Ruskin was the author of more than eighty distinct works upon a great variety of subjects. Both men were able to work under great tension and nervous strain.

One of the pleasant things to remember about Ruskin is his theory regarding the relation which should exist between master and servant, and the added fact that this theory was made a working principle of his life, so that the domestics in his household were completely devoted to him. It is interesting, also, to learn that a similar theory and practice were found with Scott. His servants were his staunchest friends in the time of his financial losses. The following passage from Lockhart will illustrate. When he visited Abbotsford in 1827, the butler, he says—

"instead of being the easy chief of a large establishment, was now doing half the work of the house, at probably half his former wages. Old Peter, who had been for five-and-twenty years a dignified coachman, was now ploughman in ordinary, only putting his horses to the carriage upon high and rare occasions; and so on with all the rest that remained of the ancient train. And all, to my view, seemed happier than they had ever been before. Their good conduct had given every one of them a new elevation in his own mind—

¹³ Harrison: *John Ruskin*, p. 4.

and yet their demeanour had gained, in place of losing, in simple humility of observance. . . . All this warm and respectful solicitude must have had a preciousy soothing influence on the mind of Scott, who may be said to have lived upon love. No man cared less about popular admiration and applause; but for the least chill on the affection of any near and dear to him he had the sensitiveness of a maiden."¹⁴

Scott and Ruskin expressed similar ideas about the things of ultimate value in the world. Scott's may be illustrated from remarks recorded by Lockhart from a conversation which the novelist had with Maria Edgeworth in Ireland. Lockhart had just said something to the effect that many poets and novelists seemed to regard life and the world merely as material for art.

"A soft and pensive shade came over Scott's face as he said—'I fear you have some very young ideas in your head:—are you not too apt to measure things by some reference to literature—to disbelieve that anybody can be worth much care who has no knowledge of that sort of thing, or taste for it? God help us! what a poor world this would be if that were the true doctrine! I have read books enough, and observed and conversed with enough of eminent and splendidly cultivated minds, too, in my time; but, I assure you, I have heard higher sentiments from the lips of poor *uneducated* men and women, when exerting the spirit of severe yet gentle heroism under difficulties and afflictions, or speaking their simple thoughts as to circumstances in the lot of friends and neighbours, than I ever yet met with out of the pages of the Bible. We shall never learn to feel and respect our real calling and destiny, unless we have taught ourselves to consider everything as moonshine, compared with the education of the heart.'"¹⁵

Akin to this idea are words by Ruskin upon education, in *Fors Clavigera*:—

"It is taken for granted, that any education must be good; that the more of it we get, the better; that bad education means only little education; and that the worst thing we have to fear is getting none. Alas, that is not at all so.

¹⁴Lockhart: *Life of Walter Scott*, v, 151.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, iv, 294.

Getting no education is by no means the worst thing that can happen to us. One of the pleasantest friends I ever had in my life was a Savoyard guide, who could only read with difficulty, and write scarcely intelligibly, and by great effort. He knew no language but his own—no science, except as much practical agriculture as served him to till his fields. But he was, without exception, one of the happiest persons, and on the whole, one of the best, I have ever known."¹⁶

But Ruskin's own testimony as to his kinship with Scott is best. In the appendix to *Fors Clavigera* one may find the following passage:—

"I should not venture to say anything to you of Scott, or of any other great man, unless I knew myself to be in closer sympathy with them than you can generally be yourselves; but observe, in claiming this sympathy I do not claim the least approach to any equality of power. I had sympathy with Tintoret, with Scott, with Turner, with Carlyle—as a child with its father or mother, not as friend with friend. What they feel, I, in a feeble and inferior way, feel also; what they are, I can tell you, because in a poor and weak way I am like them—of their race—but no match for them. It has curiously happened to me also to have been educated in many particulars under the same conditions as Scott, and often in the same places. My father was a high school lad of Edinburgh; the first picture I ever saw with conscious eyes was of Edinburgh Castle; the earliest patriotic delight I can remember, in my life, distinctly, is the delight of crossing the Tweed into Scotland; and I was educated—to all intents and purposes—by my Puritan mother and aunt, first by thorough training in the Bible, and secondly by being let loose into Homer and Scott."¹⁷

Ruskin was, then, in many ways, exactly the kind of man to be attracted by Scott. He could no more remember when he did not know the *Waverley Novels* than when he did not know the Bible.¹⁸ He translated half *The Monastery* into jingling rhyme when he was ten years old. This early acquaintance with Scott is pleasantly described in *Valle Crucis*:—

¹⁶ Ruskin's *Works*, xxvii, 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xxix, 539.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xxviii, 348.

"Among the circumstances of my early life which I count most helpful, and for which I look back with more than filial gratitude to my father's care, was his fixed habit of stopping with me, on his business journeys, patiently at any country inn that was near a castle, or an abbey, until I had seen all the pictures in the castle, and explored, as he always found me willing to do, all the nooks of the cloister. In these more romantic expeditions, aided and inspired by Scott, and never weary of re-reading the stories of *The Monastery*, *The Abbot*, and *The Antiquary*, I took an interest more deep than an ordinary child; and received impressions which guided and solemnized the whole subsequent tenor of my life."¹⁹

Numerous references in his letters of mature years show that Scott's fascination for Ruskin was a life-long one and that he never ceased to read him. Indeed, he declared that it was one of the griefs of his old age that he knew Scott by heart.²⁰ Ruskin's collection of manuscripts by Sir Walter Scott was the content of his library of which he was perhaps most proud. He bids his dearest friends "take their Scott from the inner shelf in their heart's library which all true Scotsmen give him."²¹ He would like all girls whatever to bathe in Scott daily, as a sort of ever-rolling, ever-freshening sea.²² A young student belonging to the working classes had *Waverley* recommended to him by Ruskin as appropriate reading, with careful directions for its perusal.²³ Ruskin felt that the best in his own manner of writing was learned from Byron and Scott.²⁴

He is even envious of Sir Walter at times. For example, he writes in *Fors Clavigera*:—

"Sir Walter Scott's life, in the full strength of it at Ashes-tiel, and early at Abbotsford, with his literary work done by ten, or at latest twelve in the morning; and the rest of the day spent in useful work with Tom Purdie in his woods, is a model of wise moral management of mind and body, for men of true literary power; but I had neither the country training of body, nor have the natural strength of brain, which can reach this ideal in anywise. Sir Walter

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxiii, 227.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 606.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xxv, 296.

²² *Ibid.*, xxxvii, 493.

²³ *Ibid.*, xxviii, 495.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 606.

wrote as a stream flows; but I do all my brain-work like a wrung sponge, and am tired out, and good for nothing, after it. Sir Walter was in the open air, farm-bred, and playing with lambs, while I was a poor little Cockney wretch, playing in a dark London nursery, with a bunch of keys."²⁵

Eight closely printed pages, with double columns, in the General Index of Cook's and Wedderburn's large Library Edition of Ruskin's works are taken up with references to Scott. Four of these refer exclusively to the novels. Scott's life, personality, poetry, and prose are examined. The longest continuous discussions are found in *Fiction, Fair and Foul*, where Scott is analyzed as a model for fair fiction, and in *Fors Clavigera*, where Ruskin writes a fragmentary life of Scott.

One soon learns, in using Ruskin's critical judgments, to read many or all which he has written on the point in question, if his true idea is to be found. Apparent contradictions are sometimes reconciled in this way, and isolated enthusiastic superlatives tempered. Accordingly, out of Ruskin's hundreds of references to Scott, only those which are most significant and typical, and which represent most clearly his final judgment of Scott, are here selected.

Perhaps Ruskin's whole theory of the proper kind of fiction to be written can be suggested by a passage in *Fiction, Fair and Foul*:—

"The monotony of life, in the central streets of any great modern city, but especially in those of London, where every emotion intended to be derived by men from the sight of nature, or the sense of art, is forbidden forever, leaves the craving of the heart for a sincere, yet changeful, interest, to be fed from one source only. Under natural conditions the degree of mental excitement necessary to bodily health is provided by the course of the seasons, and the various skill and fortune of agriculture. In the country every morning of the year brings with it a new aspect of springing or fading nature; a new duty to be fulfilled upon earth, and a new promise or warning in heaven. No day is without its innocent hope, its special prudence, its kindly gift, and its sublime danger; and in every process of wise husbandry,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, xxviii, 644.

and in every effort of contending or remedial courage, the wholesome passions, pride, and bodily power of the labourer are excited and exerted in happiest unison. The companionship of domestic, the care of serviceable, animals, soften and enlarge his life with lowly charities, and discipline him in familiar wisdoms and unboastful fortitudes; while the divine laws of seed-time, which cannot be recalled, harvest which cannot be hastened, and winter in which no man can work, compel the impatiences and coveting of his heart into labour too submissive to be anxious, and rest too sweet to be wanton. What thought can enough comprehend the contrast between such life, and that in streets where summer and winter are only alternations of heat and cold; where snow never fell white, nor sunshine clear; where the ground is only a pavement, and the sky no more than the glass roof of an arcade; where the utmost power of a storm is to choke the gutters, and the finest magic of spring, to change mud into dust; where—chief and most fatal difference in state—there is no interest of occupation for any of the inhabitants but the routine of counter or desk within doors, and the effort to pass each other without collision outside; so that from morning to evening the only possible variation of the monotony of the hours, and lightening of the penalty of existence, must be some kind of mischief, limited, unless by more than ordinary godsend of fatality, to the fall of a horse or the slitting of a pocket.”²⁶

Too much of the literature of England, in Ruskin’s judgment, is of a kind only to accentuate the bitterness of this crowded city life, and to reveal the squalor of its streets. It is a literature of gloom, dwelling on the sins and sorrows of mankind. “Prison-house literature,”²⁷ Ruskin dubs it. Dickens is filled with gross caricatures,²⁸ with unsightly deformities,²⁹ with exaggerations which are baneful to all good influence,³⁰ with violent death scenes,³¹ and with morbidness.³² George Eliot makes her novels “end so wretchedly that they’re worse than none”.³³ Her *Mill on the Floss* is a “vile story”³⁴ and its characters are “sweepings

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 270.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 276, 278.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii, 31 n.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 278 n, 279 n.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxvii, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 274, 275 n.

³² *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 271, 277.

³³ *Ibid.*, xxvii, 538.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 559.

out of a Pentonville omnibus".³⁵ In alluding to books appropriate for children's reading, Ruskin says: "Of all writers whatsoever of any people or language, I should most strictly forbid Thackeray."³⁶ "Carlyle's mind fixed anxiously on the future, . . . saw and felt from his earliest childhood nothing but the faultfulness and gloom of the Present."³⁷ All, for one reason or another, fail to satisfy. But Scott's "story-telling and singing were all in the joyful admiration of that past with which he could re-people the scenery he gave the working part of his day to traverse, and all the sensibility of his soul to love."³⁸ Scott's world is a sunny one in which happiness and health prevail. It is also a sternly moral world. "Scott always punishes even error", says Ruskin, "how much more fault, to the uttermost."³⁹ "His ideal of honour in men and women is inbred, indisputable; fresh as the air of his mountains; firm as their rocks."⁴⁰

In his most enthusiastic moments, Ruskin accords Scott praise so high that it would be difficult to surpass it. His life is spoken of as "beyond comparison the greatest intellectual force manifested in Europe since Shakespeare."⁴¹

"His conception of purity in woman is even higher than Dante's; his reverence for the filial relation, as deep as Virgil's; his sympathy universal;—there is no rank or condition of men of which he has not shown the loveliest aspect; his code of moral principles is entirely defined, yet taught with a reserved subtlety like Nature's own, so that none but the most earnest readers perceive the intention; and his opinions on all practical subjects are final; the consummate decisions of accurate and inevitable common-sense, tempered by the most graceful kindness."⁴² "In Pindar, Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Scott, the colossal powers of imagination result in absolute virginal purity of thought."⁴³ Until Scott there was "no such apprehensive love of all 'sorts and conditions of men', not in the soul merely, but in the flesh."⁴⁴ "Scott is beautifully just in his awards of misfortunes and success,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 377.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 588.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 546.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxv, 545.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xxix, 464.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xxvii, 563.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xxix, 457.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xxvii, 563.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, xxvii, 630.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxv, 115.

and throughout all his works there is no instance of any evil happening to any character which has not been incurred by his own fault or folly. Again, all our good feelings are brought into play; no one ever envies the hero of a romance; selfishness is put entirely out of the question; we feel as if we were the air, or the wind, or the light, or the heaven, or some omnipresent, invisible thing that has no interests of its own. We become, for the time, spirits altogether benevolent, altogether just, hating vice, loving virtue, weeping over the crime, exulting in the just conduct, lamenting the misfortune, rejoicing in the welfare of others."⁴⁵ Scott's "literally *Scotch* novels", Ruskin says, are "whatever the modern world may think of them, as faultless, throughout, as human work can be; and eternal examples of the ineffable art which is taught by the loveliest nature to her truest children."⁴⁶

Yet one must not be misled by these words of superlative praise into supposing that Ruskin's attitude toward Scott is one of pure hero-worship. In a number of places he classifies and grades Scott's novels, and one needs to know that his highest praise is granted only to those novels which to him are best. Of the inferior ones a very different sort of thing is said. The fullest classification occurs in *Fiction, Fair and Foul*. Ruskin observes that, barring the first half-volume of *Waverley*, Scott's great works of prose fiction were all written within twelve years, 1814 to 1826 (between the ages of forty-three and fifty-five), the actual time employed in their composition being not more than two months out of each year; and during that time only the morning hours and spare minutes of the professional day.⁴⁷ He omits from his count at the outset⁴⁸ the two minor and ill-finished sketches of *The Black Dwarf* and *The Legend of Montrose*, as well as the unhappy *St. Ronan's Well*. This leaves as Scott's memorable romances, eighteen, falling into three distinct groups of six each. "The first group is distinguished from the other two by characters of strength and felicity which never more appeared after Scott was struck down by the terrific illness in 1819."⁴⁸ It includes *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering*, *The Anti-*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, i, 365.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxv, 547.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 287.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 288.

quary, *Rob Roy*, *Old Mortality*, and *The Heart of Midlothian*." The second group, composed in the three years subsequent to illness all but fatal, bear every one of them more or less the seal of it.⁴⁹ This group comprises *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *Ivanhoe*, *The Monastery*, *The Abbot*, *Kenilworth*, and *The Pirate*. "Prevailing melancholy and fantastic improbability" are the two essential characteristics in these which reveal broken health.⁴⁹ "The last series contains two quite noble ones, *Redgauntlet* and *Nigel*; two of very high value, *Durward* and *Woodstock*; the slovenly and diffuse *Peperil*, written for the trade; the sickly *Tales of the Crusaders*, and the entirely broken and diseased *St. Ronan's Well*."⁵⁰

This last novel Ruskin throws out of count altogether, and of the others mentioned accepts only the first four as sound work, so that the list upon which he proposes to examine Scott's methods and ideal standards reduces itself to the following twelve: *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering*, *The Antiquary*, *Rob Roy*, *Old Mortality*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *The Monastery*, *The Abbot*, *Redgauntlet*, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, *Quentin Durward*, and *Woodstock*.⁵⁰ He alludes once to *Waverley* as Scott's greatest novel,⁵¹ but usually assigns this honor to *The Heart of Midlothian*.⁵² A collection of all passages shows that Ruskin considers the worst novels the following: *Anne of Geierstein*, *The Black Dwarf*, *Castle Dangerous*, *Count Robert of Paris*, *The Fair Maid of Perth*, *The Legend of Montrose*, and *St. Ronan's Well*.

Scott has been much criticised as one who produced too much and who composed too rapidly. This same ease of composition is to Ruskin an added evidence of genius. He declares:—

"If a great thing can be done at all, it can be done easily. But it is that kind of ease with which a tree blossoms after long years of gathered strength, and all Scott's great writings were the recreations of a mind confirmed in dutiful labour, and rich with organic gathering of boundless resource."⁵³

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 290.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 292.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xxvii, 578.

⁵² *Ibid.*, xxix, 267, 456.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 288.

And again:—

“Another very important, though not infallible, test of greatness is, as we have often said, the appearance of Ease with which the thing is done. It may be that, as with Dante and Leonardo, the finish given to the work effaces the evidence of ease; but where the ease is manifest, as in Scott, Turner, and Tintoret, and the thing done is very noble, it is a strong reason for placing the men above those who confessedly work with great pains. Scott writing his chapter or two before breakfast—not retouching; Turner finishing a whole drawing in a forenoon before he goes out to shoot (provided always the chapter and drawing be good), are instantly to be set above men who confessedly have spent a day over the work, and think the hours well spent if it has been a little mended between sunrise and sunset.”⁵⁴

The portion of *Modern Painters* from which this last extract is taken is engaged in presenting evidence that Scott is the great representative of the age in literature. Ruskin advances this idea with the realization that it may offend some who are great admirers of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Balzac, or Goethe. The first test of a really great man, in Ruskin's estimation, is his humility. This characteristic he finds preëminently present in Scott and Turner, Scott talking not about the dignity of literature, nor Turner about the dignity of painting. “They do their work, feeling that they cannot well help it; the story must be told, and the effect put down; and if people like it, well and good; and if not, the world will not be much the worse.”⁵⁵ There is an absence of affectation in the work of both men. The praiseworthiness of all this Ruskin summarizes by saying: “The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and to tell what it *saw* in a plain way. . . . To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion,—all in one.”⁵⁶

Ruskin believes, also, that Scott reveals the typical faults of his age. The most startling of these is faithlessness, and Scott, its greatest man, is faithless.⁵⁷ “Nothing is more notable, or sorrowful in Scott's mind than its incapacity of steady belief in

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, v, 333.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, v, 332.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, v, 333.

anything."⁵⁷ Again, another notable weakness of the age is its habit of "looking back, in a romantic and passionate idleness, to the past ages, not understanding them all the while, nor really desiring to understand them."⁵⁷ In the same way, Scott—

"gives up nearly the half of his intellectual power to a fond, yet purposeless, dreaming over the past, and spends his literary labours in endeavours to revive it, not in reality, but on the stage of fiction; endeavours which were the best of the kind that modernism made, but still successful only so far as Scott put, under the old armour, the everlasting human nature which he knew; and totally unsuccessful, so far as concerned the painting of the armour itself, which he knew *not*. The excellence of Scott's work is precisely in proportion to the degree in which it is sketched from present nature. His familiar life is inimitable; his quiet scenes of introductory conversation, as the beginning of *Rob Roy* and *Redgauntlet*, and all his living Scotch characters, mean or noble, from Andrew Fairservice to Jeanie Deans, are simply right and can never be bettered. But his romance and antiquarianism, his knighthood and monkery, are all false, and he knows them to be false; does not care to make them earnest; enjoys them for their strangeness, but laughs at his own antiquarianism, all through his own third novel—with exquisite modesty indeed, but with total misunderstanding of the function of an Antiquary."⁵⁷

His age mingles reverence and irreverence, levity and melancholy, and Scott is—

"light, careless, unearnest, and yet eminently sorrowful. Throughout all his work there is no evidence of any purpose but to while away the hour. His life had no other object than the pleasure of the instant, and the establishment of a family name. All his thoughts were, in their outcome and end, less than nothing, and vanity."⁵⁸

Ruskin assigns high praise to Scott as a writer of history. For example, he says: "I refer to Scott, now and always, for historical illustration, because he is far and away the best writer of history we have."⁵⁹ Scott is the great historical symbolist, and the beauty of Protestantism is finely portrayed in

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, v, 336.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, v, 338.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxiii, 506 n.

Jeanie Deans, the prototype of truth.”⁶⁰ “He gave”, says Ruskin,—

“in the stories of *Waverley*, *Rob Roy*, *Old Mortality*, *Redgauntlet*, *Nigel*, *Peveril*, and *The Abbot*, a series of realizations which are, respecting their several periods, the best historical painting yet done in Europe.”⁶¹ “It has been impossible, hitherto, to make the modern reader understand the vastness of Scott’s true historical knowledge, underneath its romantic colouring, nor the concentration of it in the production of his eternally great poems and romances.”⁶² “There have been only two real historians (to my thinking) since Herodotus—Shakespeare and Walter Scott. Neither are [*sic*] entirely to be trusted as to dates, or even material facts. Even Thucydides is only a chronicler, a useful sort of person, but not an historian. But once understand Shakespeare’s Cæsar, Henry the Fifth, and John of Gaunt; once understand Scott’s Marmion, King James, Coeur de Lion, Saladin, and Robin Hood, and after that you may read the chronicles of the great ages, and see your way into them for yourself, and learn here and there a thing or two, which Shakespeare indeed knew, but didn’t think it wise to talk of, and which Scott wouldn’t know, and always looked the other way when he passed the door.”⁶³

Ruskin discusses a number of other characteristics of Scott which may be quickly passed over. He seeks to show that Scott’s use of the supernatural is always best when he admits it freely and does not attempt to explain it.⁶⁴ He analyzes the effect which Scott’s native countryside had upon his genius.⁶⁵ He traces the influence which his legal knowledge had in the *dénouement* of his stories and in the delineation of his characters.⁶⁶ He discusses his treatment of love, finds his women more constant than his men, and notes that love is not always the paramount issue in Scott.⁶⁷ He investigates his dialect and discusses it at some length.⁶⁸ His sympathetic treatment of nature is observed,⁶⁹ although this receives most illustrations from the poems. Ruskin praises Scott for his fidelity of obser-

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxiii, 506.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xxxiii, 229.

⁶² *Ibid.*, xxxv, 546.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, xxiv, 432.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, xxix, 455.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, i, 259; xxxiv, 331.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, xxvii, 586-588.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 284.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 297.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, i, 258; v, 340.

vation, and is fond of commending his Gainsborough touch and of likening him to Turner. His attitude toward Catholics,⁷⁰ Presbyterians,⁷¹ and Covenanters⁷² receives mention. Enough has been said and quoted, however, to convey an idea of Ruskin's estimate of Scott, and it is time to attempt an evaluation of these critical judgments.

It need not be pointed out that these ideas concerning Scott, as they have been presented, involve inconsistencies. Yet it must not be forgotten that the extracts have been culled from various sources and placed in juxtaposition here. In some cases, Ruskin's chief object was to discuss Scott's work; in others, Scott is mentioned only as illustration of some other point. The lapse of years, too, should enter in as a corrective to one's criticism of Ruskin. It is known that he changed his mind upon other subjects; his attitude toward Scott may have been a developing and a changing one. Ruskin's habit of mind must constantly be remembered also. He never writes idly, and seldom without enthusiasm. At one time, his thoughts may be wholly occupied with literature moral or healthful in tone, and all other considerations fall for the moment into abeyance. At another time, it may be the correct attitude toward nature which is the all-absorbing topic of interest to Ruskin, and Scott is drawn upon to corroborate this second idea. Thus it is that his detached critical statements upon Scott may appear incomplete or even untrue at times and may often cohere badly when grouped together. One must not forget either the nature of his emotions or the occasions of his writing. I have said that he never wrote idly. More than this, he wrote with terrible earnestness as his years advanced. His was oftentimes the note of the Hebrew prophet, predicting woe to the people of his generation if they reformed not. He had the courage, in his single person, to defy the whole nation and the world. At times, in ecstatic mood, he highly exalts those who seem to him to have followed the true light, and as bitterly denounces others who are heretical to the system of truth which he has evolved. His writing does not smell of the ink-pot, nor does it savor

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxiii, 228.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, xxvii, 564; xxxiii, 228.

⁷² *Ibid.*, xxxv, 64 n.

always of the deliberation of the critical and philosophical mind. It is rather as if the words of a high-minded and passionately eloquent orator were caught suddenly in air and immortalized in print. He delights in elaborating systems which are presented as complete and above reproach or danger of error. All these things must be borne in mind when one wishes to use Ruskin as a critic. Yet this explanation cannot explain away all inconsistencies, nor enable us unqualifiedly to accept all his opinions concerning Scott.

How could one, for example, who was "wholly light, careless and unearnest", and without any other object in life than the "pleasure of the instant", create an ideal of womanhood "higher than that of Dante's"? It will be recalled that Scott, with his stories of the golden past, was set up against Carlyle, who dwelt in the present, as a model; yet elsewhere Scott is branded as being always artificial when he goes back of the actual scenes and events with which he is familiar. Ruskin's praise of Scott's fine historical insight recurs to us here. To be sure, it is, in a way, a difference in emphasis. In one instance, it is the purity of Scott's women which is uppermost in his thoughts; in the other, he is eager to make clear that Scott shares the characteristic faults of his age. But the inconsistency remains.

Equally difficult is it to justify in detail some of Ruskin's warmest encomiums of Scott. That the latter's ideal of womanhood is higher than Dante's is as impossible as it is untrue. There are many lovely ladies in Scott's stories, but they are fashioned of flesh and blood and belong to this world. His Scotch novels are declared to be "as faultless throughout as human work can be". This is fulsome praise, before which Shakespeare himself must be found wanting. Let it be applied to one of the six novels which Ruskin ranks highest. *Waverley* heads the list. This first story is more discursive and rambling than other of his novels which were produced later, when he had learned his craft better. One enjoys the kaleidoscopic adventures of the hero, but cannot honestly maintain for them an Aristotelian degree of probability and reality. Scott says himself that he composed it so rapidly that the last two volumes were written in two weeks. He explains that he let the interest

flag in the first volume on purpose because he wished to avoid the typical error of most novelists, who make their first volume best.⁷³ The hero Scott calls a "sneaking piece of imbecility",⁷⁴ and many feel likewise. The book does not reveal consummate artistry. It is thrown together hastily; its parts are not well articulated; it does not possess wholeness, singleness, and unity of plot. I am allowing myself to forget, for the moment, the delightful features of the story, together with the reasons which render its advent significant in the evolution of English literature, and am relentlessly testing Ruskin's judgment.

A good way to introduce the subject of Scott's shortcomings is to read his own confession of them in the introductions of *The Abbot* and *The Fortunes of Nigel*. In the second book, in the conversation between the author of *Waverley* and the mythical Captain Clutterbuck, the former remarks:—

"Believe me, I have not been fool enough to neglect ordinary precautions. I have repeatedly laid down my future work to scale, divided it into volumes and chapters, and endeavoured to construct a story which I meant should evolve itself gradually and strikingly, maintain suspense, and stimulate curiosity; and which, finally, should terminate in a striking catastrophe. But I think there is a demon who seats himself on the feather of my pen when I begin to write, and leads it astray from the purpose. Characters expand under my hand; incidents are multiplied; the story lingers, while the materials increase; my regular mansion turns out a Gothic anomaly, and the work is closed long before I have attained the point I proposed. . . . When I light on such a character as Bailie Jarvie, or Dalgetty, my imagination brightens, and my conception becomes clearer at every step which I take in his company, although it leads me many a weary mile away from the regular road, and forces me to leap hedge and ditch to get back into the route again. If I resist the temptation, as you advise me, my thoughts become prosy, flat, and dull; I write painfully to myself, and under a consciousness of flagging which makes me flag still more; the sunshine with which fancy had invested the incidents departs from them, and leaves everything dull and gloomy. I am no more the same author

⁷³ Lockhart: *Life of Walter Scott*, ii, 333.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, ii, 334.

I was in my better mood, than the dog in a wheel, condemned to go round and round for hours, is like the same dog merrily chasing his own tail, and gambolling in all the frolic of unrestrained freedom. In short, sir, on such occasions, I think I am bewitched."

Scott has become his own judge here. He never wholly frees himself from the faults of diffuseness and discursiveness, which lead to tediousness. He admits that his endings are "huddled up."⁷⁵ These faults are sufficient to invalidate Ruskin's contention that his best works are "eternal examples of ineffable art".

Ruskin has written eloquently concerning ease of composition as a criterion of greatness. "No great composition was ever produced", he writes, "by composing, nor by arranging chapters and dividing volumes; but only with the same heavenly involuntariness in which a bird builds her nest."⁷⁶ One is able to recognize the partial truth of this theory and to admit that Scott was able in later years to avail himself readily of the great store of knowledge which he had gathered in early life. But Dante's great poem made him "lean for many years", and he was greater than either Scott or Ruskin. It is surely true that both these later men would have risen higher had they attempted less and perfected this smaller amount of work. Their qualities of mind are alike in this regard, and Ruskin's faculties are dulled to the faults of Scott which are so like his own. The intemperate amount of work which Ruskin allowed himself to attempt in his mature years not only brought on brain-storm, but almost revealed a chronic state of mental unbalance. Scott's literary labors, as everyone knows, were but a small part of his whole occupation. He was a busy man of affairs, and prided himself more apparently on being an opulent landed gentleman than as the author of the *Waverley Novels*. Both men were inaccurate and careless; both were guilty of misquoting; both lack finish and leave loose ends in their works. Scott confessed to Lockhart that he "never learned grammar".⁷⁷ His writing, as well as that of Ruskin, reveals many infelicities, and neither could be

⁷⁵ "Introductory Epistle" (*The Abbot*). ⁷⁶ Ruskin's *Works*, xxix, 265.

⁷⁷ *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott* (ed. 1890), i, 181.

taken as a safe model in composition for a schoolboy. This state of things was almost inevitable under the conditions which they accepted as they wrote. It is a fine thing to write as a bird sings, but even the throat of a bird would become less tuneful, perhaps, were its tiny stomach surfeited.

Graded categories of literary productions are somewhat dangerous, and different critics are almost certain to vary in detail in their judgments. Ruskin delights in analysis and classification, and his opinions are always uttered with the conviction of direct inspiration. His classification of the *Waverley Novels* may be examined with more respect, however, when it is realized that it was made by one thoroughly familiar with Scott, one who had derived unceasing inspiration from him. His theory of disease as the terminating factor of Scott's deterioration is interesting, and there seems little doubt that his later works did "smack of the apoplexy". Yet, as Cook, Ruskin's editor, notes, the theory that Scott's perfect novels were all produced during unclouded days and before physical suffering had come upon him breaks down at a crucial point when brought to the test of dates. Ruskin gives 1819 as the year of Scott's "terrific illness", but Lockhart testifies that his serious break in health began in 1817.⁷⁸ This was the year before the publication of *Rob Roy* and *The Heart of Midlothian*, so that both these books were composed through recurrent fits of acute bodily pain, yet find their place in the list of Scott's best works. "Lightly and airily as it [*Rob Roy*] reads", says Lockhart, "the author has struggled almost throughout with the pains of cramp or the lassitude of opium."⁷⁹ This illustrates the danger of categorical declarations of this sort, and the frequent carelessness of Ruskin's statements. It is easy to see that the classification is based upon Ruskin's favorite idea of the sanity of tone appropriate for the highest type of fiction, and that other technical considerations are passed over here. *Woodstock* and *Quentin Durward*, in both of which the mechanism of Scott's narrative is more successful than in some others, are placed in the third category by Ruskin.

⁷⁸ Lockhart: *Life of Walter Scott*, iii, 99.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, iii, 147.

One feels, too, that as Scott is not wholly good, so Dickens, George Eliot, and Thackeray are not wholly bad. Dickens's rogues' gallery contains many marks of genius, and, whatever be the danger of the type, his novels themselves did not always prove deleterious. George Eliot's characters show a depth and richness which are perhaps not found in any of Scott's. Again, one fancies that he could find more destructive and baneful literature than that produced by Thackeray. Ruskin is wedded to a single idea here, and makes sweeping condemnations. Other references to the same writers show that he regards them as not wholly without merit. His depreciation here is of the same sort as that in which he underrates Wordsworth to exalt Byron.

In *Fiction, Fair and Foul*,⁸⁰ Ruskin gives six conditions of greatness necessary to perfect style, which have won the respect of critics. He applies them in the first place to poetry, but it will not be uninteresting to apply them to prose, and it will furnish an interesting final test of Ruskin's contention that Scott is, in certain works, a flawless artist, to measure these novels by his own critical canon. The six tests are familiar, and are as follows: (1) Absolute command over all passion, however intense; (2) choice of the fewest and simplest words that can be found in the compass of the language to express the thing meant; (3) perfectly emphatic and clear utterance of the chosen words; (4) absolute spontaneity in doing all this, easily and necessarily as the heart beats; (5) melody in the words, changeable with their passion, fitted to it exactly, and the utmost of which the language is capable; (6) utmost spiritual contents in the words.

Scott at his best *does* control his passion. Jeanie Deans has fine reserve and poise; the sorrow of Saunders Mucklebackit over the death of his son is told simply and does not give offence. Similarly, the deaths in *Old Mortality* are delicately managed. But there is sufficient melodrama in Scott, and absence too often of really deep passion to be restrained to make us hesitate to cite him as a supreme example of the chaste yet passionate artist who is always filled with the deepest emotion under perfect control. The previous comments upon Scott's defects in

⁸⁰ Ruskin's *Works*, xxxiv, 335.

prosody may be applied here as evidence that he fell below the three tests which have to do with the technique of great writing. Ruskin would probably cite perfect spontaneity as a gift of Scott's, but the novelist himself confessed, as we have seen, that his inspiration was not ceaseless and that his spontaneity was impaired by defects. Ruskin declared once, as already pointed out, that, "throughout all Scott's writing there is no evidence of any purpose but to while away the hour". Scott's own testimony is better in the introductory epistle to *The Fortunes of Nigel*, when he says:—

"Grant . . . that I should write with sense and spirit a few scenes, unlaboured and loosely put together, but which had sufficient interest in them to amuse in one corner the pain of body; in another to relieve anxiety of mind; in a third place, to unwrinkle a brow bent with the furrows of daily toil; in another to fill the place of bad thoughts, or to suggest better; in yet another, to induce an idler to study the history of his own country; in all, save where the perusal interrupted the discharge of serious duties, to furnish harmless amusement,—might not the author of such a work, however inartificially executed, plead for his errors and negligences the excuse of the slave, who, about to be punished for having spread the false report of a victory, saved himself by exclaiming: 'Am I to blame, O Athenians, who have given you one happy day?'"

Yet neither this purpose nor its result in the *Waverley Novels* would lead one to assign "the utmost spiritual contents" to his words.

I would not convey the impression, however, that I regard Scott as a poor writer, or Ruskin as an unthinking enthusiast in his criticism. He would be a strange man indeed who would not rejoice that Scott, while rummaging in the confusion of that old desk-drawer at Abbotsford, happened by chance upon the unfinished and long neglected manuscript of *Waverley* and decided to complete it. Unappreciative would he be also, should he fail to recognize that Ruskin's love of Scott and his writing about him are of value.

One needs to know Ruskin's habits of mind, accordingly, in order to be able to correct some of the latter's errors in judg-

ment, if he is to be used wisely as a critic; but he should realize also that Ruskin is sensitive, stimulating, and not infrequently discerning, and that, in the present instance, the object of his criticism is a worthy, although not an infallible, one. It is said of Scott that he lacked scholarly authority in his translations, but that he seemed to divine, by a sort of instinct, something at least of the spirit of the piece he sought to convert into his own language. Again, as an editor, he is spoken of as lacking in scientific and textual knowledge, but possessed of an appreciation of the literature before him. So, too, as an historian, he makes palpable errors, but does revivify the past and does make it graphically present to later generations. In the same way, Ruskin says many unwise and untrue things of Scott, but he does discern the best in him and emphasizes that with eloquence, and the success with which he performs this latter service helps to render us tolerant toward his other mistakes. Ruskin is a preacher and would be a prophet. He is speaking of tendencies when he seeks to appraise Scott's novels. No one of us would wish to combat the contention that a nation should cultivate a literature of health, not one of sickness. Shakespeare is better for all ages of the world than Ibsen; Scott than Hardy.

Ruskin's ideal of fair fiction as akin to a Greek vase is pleasant to contemplate: "Planned rigorously, rounded smoothly, balanced symmetrically, handled handily, lipped softly",⁸¹ it must be. Nor is our pleasure dissipated as we pass down from this ideal to Scott's novels. They satisfy a variety of moods. If one wishes to whet his imagination to realize the spirit of chivalric times, *Ivanhoe* is not a bad book to read. If the desire be for exciting adventure of other days, *Quentin Durward* will always find its readers. If it be Scotland, her people and her ways, which is sought, one would seriously err not to read Scott. We are apt to forget how large a number of his novels have to do with Scotland. Twenty-two out of thirty-two novels and stories have their scenes laid wholly or in part in Scotland; and of those left over, three—*The Fortunes of Nigel*, *Quentin Durward*, and *The Talisman*—have Scotsmen for their leading characters. Finally, if

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, xxxiv, 370.

we are honest, we shall acknowledge hours spent far from unhappily in the perusal of such stories as *Anne of Geierstein*, *The Pirate*, or *The Highland Widow*, to which books no one gives first place among Scott's work.

Even Carlyle, whose strictures upon Scott are famous, could say of his work:—

"It is the perfection of extemporaneous writing. . . . No fresher paintings of Nature can be found than Scott's; hardly anywhere a wider sympathy with man. From Davie Deans to Richard Coeur-de-Lion; from Meg Merrilies to Die Vernon and Queen Elizabeth! It is the utterance of a man of open soul; of a brave, large, free-seeing man, who has a true brotherhood with all men."⁸²

Although Scott, then, is neither ineffable nor infallible, he is unusual and highly interesting, and we shall think kindly of him as we leave him. A good way to secure this feeling is to look again at the *man* who wrote the novels. A glance into his journal at the time of his adversity will serve:—

"Something in my breast tells me my evil genius will not overwhelm me if I stand by myself.⁸³ . . . I feel neither dishonoured nor broken down by the bad—now really bad news I have received. . . . I will not yield without a fight for it. . . . In prosperous times I have sometimes felt my fancy and powers of language flag, but adversity is to me at least a tonic and bracer; the fountain is awakened from its inmost recesses, as if the spirit of affliction had troubled it in its passage.⁸⁴ . . . But I will involve no friend, either rich or poor. My own right hand shall do it."⁸⁵

There are times, then, when one should make himself see, and see clearly, the ways in which Scott falls short of perfection. There are other times when one should sit down and read him "with happiness and elation". When the reader is in this latter mood, an excellent companion and guide will be found in John Ruskin.

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⁸² Carlyle: *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (ed. Sterling), iii, 453.

⁸³ *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, i, 86 (Jan. 20, 1826).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, i, 89 (Jan. 22, 1829).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, i, 90.